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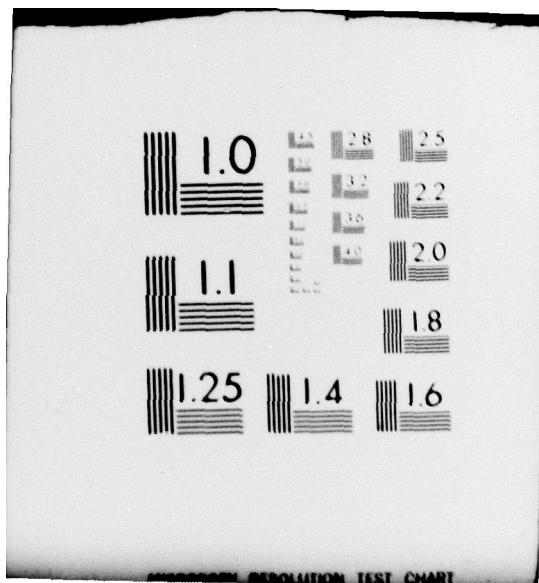
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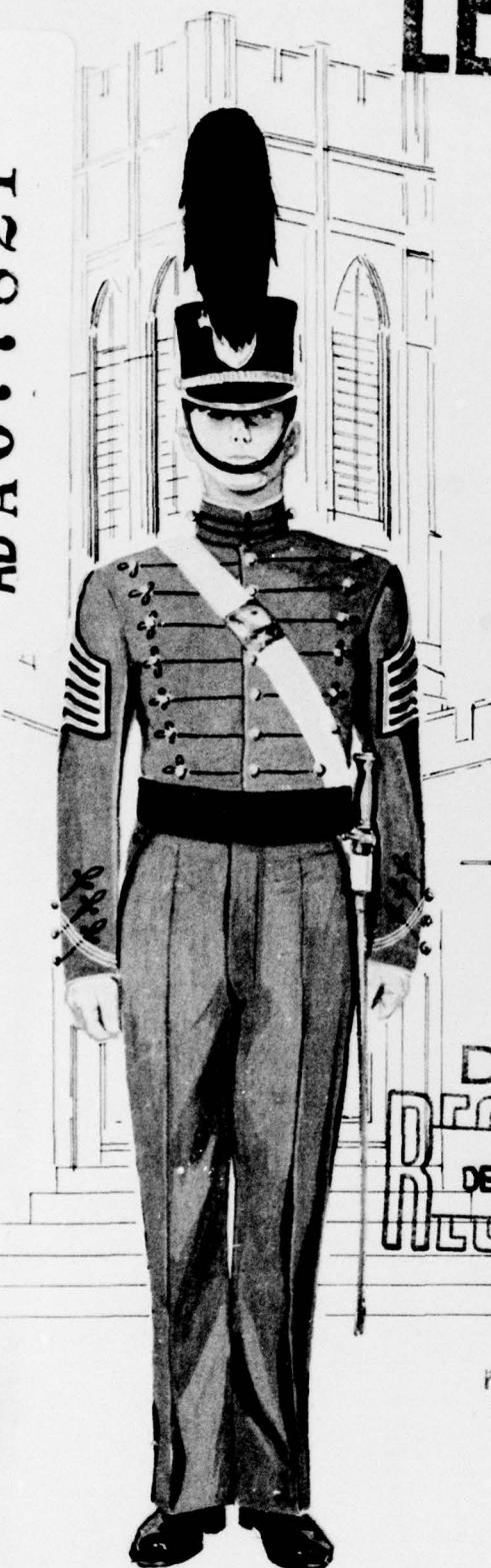
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INTERVIEWING BY ADMISSIONS PARTICIPANTS

Report No. 1C1.02-78-005  
Project No. 231  
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ABSTRACT

This report describes research findings intended to improve the validity and reliability of selection interviewing. It is oriented to Admissions Participants who assist the Director of Admissions and Registrar by interviewing applicants to the U.S. Military Academy.

NOTE: Any conclusions in this report are not to be construed as official U.S. Military Academy or Department of the Army positions unless so designated by other authorized documents.

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## INTERVIEWING BY ADMISSIONS PARTICIPANTS

One of the most widely used personnel evaluation procedures is the selection interview. Paradoxically, it is among the most widely mistrusted, and for good reasons. Wagner (1949), Mayfield (1964), Ulrich and Trumbo (1965), and Hakel and Dunnette (1970), in their reviews of research studies on the selection interview, agree that most interviews are conducted in such a way as to be unreliable and nonvalid. Thus, it seems that the selection interview typically suffers from misuse. It is used differently by each interviewer, who in turn tends to use different methods from one interview to the next.

In spite of the pessimism generated from the above mentioned reviews, all of which were completed more than six years ago, there are some recent research findings and some basic principles which may be of value to USMA's admissions participants (AP's). The purpose of this paper is to present some of these findings in the hope that AP's may find them useful when they interview applicants.

### Interviewing Done Correctly\*

The AP's Participant Handbook (May 1976) and the Admissions Office Information Bulletin (1 Feb 1977) are excellent sources for learning some of the principles specific to interviewing applicants and why the interview is used by the Director of Admissions and Registrar (DAR). There is no need to duplicate this information. Instead, information expanding that which is contained in these sources, and summarizing guidelines that research has established, will be presented. Using this information should improve interviewing skills. Guidelines based on recent findings and some basic principles are:

1. Develop a Basic Standard of Comparison, and Use it for All Interviewees. In 1971, Carlson found that if an interviewer evaluated a candidate who was just average after evaluating three or four very unfavorable candidates in a row, the average candidate would be evaluated very favorably. Wexley's (1972) results were similar--when an average candidate was preceded by two above average or two below average candidates, the contrast effects accounted for a substantial part of the final ratings. Thus, these interviewers did not have an absolute standard--who they thought looked good was largely determined by the preceding candidates. This indicates that a set yardstick is needed to evaluate candidates. The same system, or frame-of-reference, should be applicable to each candidate.

2. Avoid Situational Pressure. One large group of interviewers was told by Carlson (1971) to assume that they were behind their recruiting

\*See the appendix for a skit on how not to interview.

quota; another group was told it was ahead of quota; and a third group was told that no quota existed. Results showed that being behind quota impaired the judgment of those interviewers. They evaluated the same interviewees as actually having greater potential and said they would select more of them than did the other two groups of interviewers. The moral of this study is that AP's should not feel that they function under a quota system with time constraints.

3. Take Notes. On a simple and factual quiz, those interviewers who took no notes got about half their answers wrong. Those who took notes did much better (Carlson, 1971). The less accurate interviewers selected a "halo strategy" when evaluating interviewees, while the more accurate interviewers were able to pick out skill differences within an individual. The reason for this was that the accurate interviewers had their notes to rely on, whereas the other interviewers had to rely on memory, which is asking too much. So, when interviewing, take notes to help make final ratings.

4. Use a Structured Interview. One question often asked is: "What kind of interview is best--unstructured, semi-structured, or structured?" Carlson's (1971) results indicated that only the structured interview generated information that enabled interviewers to agree with each other. Under structured conditions, the interviewer knew what to ask and what to do with the information he received. Moreover, the interviewer applied the same frame of reference to each applicant, since he covered the same areas for each. In the less structured interviews, the interviewers received additional information, but it was unorganized and made their evaluation task more difficult. In a structured interview, the same questions are asked each candidate, but with flexibility for probing. This is particularly important during these days of equal opportunity. Being only human, interviewers can evidence covert or overt prejudice. Equalitarian attitudes regarding all groups are necessary. And this applies to the physically attractive and unattractive candidates too. Dipboye (1977) found that regardless of the sex of the candidate, physically attractive candidates were preferred over unattractive candidates in simulated selection interview settings. So add discrimination against physically unattractive candidates to the compendium of common interviewer biases. Thus, use a structured interview. It has the greatest potential for valid selection.

5. Be an Active Listener. The active listener does not passively interact but instead tries to understand the essence of what the speaker is saying (Serafini, 1975). Active listening requires a fundamental openness toward the other person. The active listener becomes attuned to the significance of immediate meaning and feelings and in order to do so rejects preconceived ideas and stereotypes. A favorable impression on the part of the interviewee is created by an active listener.

6. Make Decisions on Ratings Only After All the Data have been Gathered and Analyzed. A study by Springbelt (1958) found that the final decision to accept or reject was crystallized after a mean interviewing time of only four minutes. This is clear testimony to the prepotence of

early impressions in dictating final outcome. However, it is best to gather all the information first and then to make a decision, since perceptions are dynamic and may change greatly during the interview (Hakel, 1970).

7. Don't let Unfavorable Information have Undue Emphasis, Especially if the Deficiency can be Easily Corrected by Training and Education at West Point. Concerning the importance of unfavorable information, Webster (1964) wrote that a single negative characteristic may bar a man from being an acceptable candidate, but that no number of positive characteristics would guarantee his acceptability. Springbelt (1958) supported this when he found that just one unfavorable rating was followed by a rejection decision in 90% of the cases. Recent work by Schoenfeldt (1977) indicates that certain skills are much more trainable than others. The inference is that interviewers should give a small weight to skills that are easily trained, and a large weight to skills that are hard to train. The only problem is that we have not yet applied Schoenfeldt's model to West Point to discover easy and hard to train skills. In the meantime, don't over-weight one or two bits of unfavorable information.

8. Be Alert to the Influence of Nonverbal Communication. Imada and Hakel (1977) found that nonverbal communication or behavior had a significant effect on interviewer impressions and subsequent decisions. They found that interviewees who had good eye contact, good posture, and smiled, gestured, and sat close to the interviewer were rated as acceptable four times as often as those interviewees who behaved in an opposite fashion. These findings support the old cliché that it's not only what you say, but how you say it. However, whether the nonverbal behavior adds useful or nuisance data to selection decisions is not known. Nevertheless, all interviewers should be aware of this phenomenon. There is one major practical implication from the interviewee's standpoint; namely, those who are aware of and use nonverbal communication are one step ahead of those who know nothing about it.

9. Avoid Common Errors in Scoring; be Sure to:

a. Consider and score each rating factor separately from the others. It is not necessary to score a candidate the same on all factors. Everyone has weak and strong points.

b. Use more than one point on the rating scale. Try not to let all your ratings pile up in the middle or at either end.

c. Balance out the strengths and weaknesses about the applicant, and don't give negative information an undue amount of weight.

d. Hold your gut feelings in check. Base your scoring on data gathered.

e. Realize that you may be rating a candidate too low if you've just finished interviewing a superb applicant, or too high if you've just seen an unsatisfactory one.

f. Keep your biases in check, or take steps to overcome the ones you cannot help. One check is to see if all those you rated high are similar to you in race, religion, sex or national origin despite the fact that you interviewed candidates from many minority groups.

10. Attend an Interview Workshop. One can read all that is available about interviewing and still be an inadequate interviewer. It is best to supplement reading with practical experience gained from an interview workshop (Latham, 1975). In a good workshop, the trainer first discusses the interview and principles of measurement in general. He then tells trainees how to perform the skills necessary for good interviewing, and demonstrates these skills by conducting interviews with the trainees observing. Then trainees interview and the trainer observes. In such supervised practice, many mistakes are quickly corrected. Training like this can reduce common rating errors such as contrast effects, halo effects, similarity, and first impressions. Videotapes can be used very effectively also.

Complying with the ten guidelines cannot guarantee great interviews. They won't insure your gathering perfectly reliable and valid data, but using them effectively should make you a better interviewer than you are now; at least you'll be aware of some common pitfalls.

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APPENDIX

"INTERVIEWING GONE HAYWIRE"

A Skit in One Act

Kathleen Carroll\*

Scene: Officer and candidate sitting in a room with picture portraits of MacArthur, Eisenhower, Patton and other illustrious USMA grads covering the walls.

Officer: Just feast your eyes on these men. Just think, some day you too could be up there next to George and Ike. Gives you a real thrill doesn't it?

Candidate: Well, sir, I hope I can get into West Point, but being a general is a long way from a plebe cadet.

Officer: Oh, not that far for someone with your credentials. So what if your ACT English wasn't that high, you've got other attributes. I see you were president of your class and made all-county football. You got the American Legion award too. Well, do you have any questions about USMA that need clearing up?

Candidate: Could you describe what my life would be like at West Point? I have a vague idea but need more concrete information.

Officer: Imagine yourself at a place totally dedicated to you and your education. Every person working for that goal. Convenient shopping, library, sports and recreation facilities. Also movies and dances. Surrounded by history and beauty. And just think, a few hundred feet up the road, a college full of women looking for cadets. What more could a male college student ask for? And for free too!

Candidate: That sounds very nice sir, but I've heard that the first month is quite rough. Is that true sir?

Officer: Oh, you know how those newspaper reporters like to exaggerate when there may be a story in it. Just the normal adjustments to being away from home for the first time. Now, we're not a baby are we? Why, just some guys having a few jokes. And you

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\*Kathleen Carroll is a clerk-typist in the Office of the Director of Institutional Research. She joined ODIR on 29 July 1976.

APPENDIX (Continued)

get your chance when you're a senior. When you're an officer, you'll laugh when you look back. I remember one plebe we . . . , oh well, anyway, it's not that bad. Look at me, I've been through it and I'm still here.

Candidate: I've also heard that it is very strict here. I kind of had the impression it was very conservative.

Officer: Conservative? Why, we were going to have Kris Kristofferson teach there. Is that conservative?

Candidate: Another problem I have is that I'm not sure I want to spend five years in the Army.

Officer: What! Five years in the Army? That's not much. And what's wrong with five years of travel and TLC. Think of all the wonderful places you'll visit. Like combining work and pleasure.

Candidate: Sir, I haven't yet gotten the results of my medical examination. Is there any reason for that?

Officer: No, not really. When did you have it done?

Candidate: Six months ago.

Officer: Don't worry. I'll check on it for you though.

Candidate: I'd appreciate that, sir.

Officer: I see you have a Senator's nomination. Any chance you could get a Presidential? (Candidate looks doubtful.) Well, we'll just have to make do. And I see you didn't belong to any clubs.

Candidate: No sir, between football, my homework, being Class President, and holding a job, I found I had little free time.

Officer: Didn't even belong to a street gang? (Candidate shakes head.) Oh well, it shouldn't matter too much.

Candidate: Sir, I'm not too familiar with West Point--I mean what the place is like, where things are, what's available. Is there any way you know of that I could maybe come there for a tour or something like that?

Officer: Sure, you come up some weekend. It wouldn't cost much. Motels are pretty good around there, and you could always stay at the

APPENDIX (Continued)

Thayer. So come up and just wander around. Maybe bump into a few cadets and ask them about the place. Well kid, it's 4:00, and if I don't get to my car now, I'll never get home. The traffic here is murder! So, good luck kid, see ya 'round. (Officer hustles the candidate out the door.)

End of Skit

While some of this skit may be exaggerated for effect, it is useful as an illustration of some things to avoid when interviewing applicants. As you can tell, the interviewer made many errors. He really didn't obtain from, nor impart to, the applicant any useful information. The officer made a hasty decision about the applicant's credentials, and probably inspired goals that could never be reached. His answers to some of the questions glossed over the probing questions of the applicant. If you look over this interview carefully, you will find other errors that the interviewer made. Obviously, a good interview is the antithesis of what you have just read.

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